

## NATURAL ENVIRONMENT WHITE PAPER

Consultation response by John Bacon and Bill Grayson on behalf of the VINE Executive Committee. 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

*Thank you to those VINE members who responded to Bill's request for thoughts on our response. These have helped us to formulate our submission. Our responses have inevitably been constrained by the questions set in the consultation and the guidance given but we have tried to focus on the underlying ethics and inspirational issues appropriate to VINE; especially where we feel the UK needs to apply its efforts by taking a world view. Whilst we have cited some specific actions to be taken in the UK, by way of setting an international example, we have assumed that other wildlife organisations in the UK would be responding with much more detailed proposals so have not watered down our unique VINE viewpoint.*

*Before submitting our response we did spend some time viewing the Environmental Section of the Defra website and would commend this to you all! It did affect what we have said and what we felt we did not need to say. There is some really good stuff there much of which we would support – lets hope it can be implemented despite the cuts!*

### **Defra information for submission of responses:**

[www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/)

Please email your responses to: [naturalenvironment@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:naturalenvironment@defra.gsi.gov.uk); or submit comments over the Defra website at [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/); or post them to: Natural Environment White Paper Team, Area 3D, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR.

### **Responses from John and Bill on behalf of VINE:**

**FIRSTLY, AN OPENING COMMENT TO SET THE CONTEXT FOR ALL THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES. VINE'S APPROACH IS VERY MUCH THAT IF HEARTS AND MINDS CAN BE WON THEN APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR WILL FOLLOW. WE NEED TO GET PEOPLE TO CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIOUR BECAUSE THEY ARE PERSUADED THAT THEIR CONTRIBUTION WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE! IN THE SAME WAY THAT THE OCEAN IS MADE UP OF DROPLETS OF WATER OUR FUTURE WILL BE DETERMINED BY THE CHOICES, DECISIONS AND ACTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS!**

Now we move on with specific responses to your questions.

### **Question 1: What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?**

Continue to pursue development, understanding and adoption of true 'costs' and 'benefits' not just in economic terms of man activities on natural (eco)systems but also to us as a species in the way we live and what we will have to cope with in the future. I.e. life cycle assessments from: field to fork in agriculture; source to outflow in water catchments; cradle to grave for each of us, etc, etc. Until society is 'charged' with the true ecological cost of our activities on the planet people as individual 'consumers' will continue to give the

health of the planet a lower priority than their own well being and status when making their individual purchasing choices; until companies are ‘charged’ with the true cost of the environmental impacts of their businesses’ they will continue to prioritise dividends to shareholders and profit to owners. A step change is needed in the way we relate to our life support systems. We need to see wider adoption of ecologically holistic (= Gaia) type ethics and values. This has to be sponsored by our democratically elected government, leading by example as well as statute, supporting ecologically beneficial initiatives at all levels of society and taking firm action to prevent activities that threaten the well-being of an environment upon which we and myriad other life forms depend.

**Question 2: Have we identified the right overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider?**

**a. If not, what should we focus on?**

When all our problems are boiled down to basics we are a ‘species’ running out of control on many fronts. The two combining factors which are having the greatest impact on the quality of our environment and life support systems are:

- a) the rapid rise in global population;
- b) the rise in living standards of those in under-developed parts of the world to equate with those of the ‘developed’ world.

**b. How should we approach these challenges?**

a) Population growth needs a new focus to be directed on the issues at a global level - and not ignoring the negative (even sabotaging) role that some religions are having on the take up of birth control options.

b) The rise in living standards of the poor should be argued as a human right. The founding of the globalized economy on the totally irrational rationale of ‘infinite growth’ needs to be challenged at the most fundamental levels. Until governments and corporations are able to demonstrate a willingness to confront this hugely destructive dogma and reconcile economic policies with the material aspirations of wider society the world will continue to rush headlong towards an environmental crash that will make the current economic collapse seem insignificant. Improvement of the lives of the poorest people in the world must still be a priority but this needs to be on the basis of a better distribution of the Earth’s limited supply of resources rather than as a byproduct of the increasing accumulation of wealth by the richest. One of the potential benefits of globalization would be if it facilitated a fairer apportionment of resources amongst the world’s people, something that in itself is likely to help slow down the rate of population increase. The further development and widespread adoption of fully green technologies will help reduce impacts.

**Question 3: What are the existing policies and practices aimed at protecting England’s natural assets (including but not limited to those set out above on our biodiversity, seas, water bodies, air and soil) that currently work most effectively?**

**Biodiversity: Retain and protect all BAP habitats and designated sites and use these as reservoirs of species to expand into landscape scale habitats networks and wildlife**

corridors. Adopt buffer zones where appropriate to ensure objectives are attained. Continue financial support of the management of designated sites to at least 'favourable-status'.

**Water:** Continue the 'catchment' approach to management of these resources. Enforce current legislation much more effectively to safeguard both the quality and the supply of above -and below-ground resources. Stronger measures to reduce usage and conserve supply are needed immediately. All supplies, including domestic ones, should be metered.

**Soil:** adopt 'organic' approaches to soil management. The loss of organic matter from English soils has proceeded unabated for the last 70 years and the damage to our wildlife, food supply, climate, water resources, and human health are only now beginning to be recognized. The government should take a lead in promoting organic farming methods as the preferred system of food production in England.

**Seas:** adopt 'sustainable harvesting' approach to all fisheries. Promote a sustainable consumption message to consumers, based on the Marine Conservation Society standards and branding.

**a. What works less well – what could we stop doing or do differently?**

There's not much left to cut out! Should try and integrate different policy initiatives so that they reinforce each other. Messages are more persuasive when they are supported from many angles.

**Question 4: What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively in future?**

'Favourable condition' assessment appears to be a very good and logical approach for much more than just assessing biodiversity on SSSIs. It could be expanded and developed to include a much wider range of environmental criteria based on ensuring all aspects of natural capital are protected and, wherever possible, enhanced.

**a. How should we define success?**

Not to lose more capital (ecosystems, habitats, species, environmental services). Attainment of 'favourable condition' status as the norm across the whole of the natural environment, as well as biodiversity.

**b. How can we agree on common goals and assess our progress towards them?**

Again 'favourable condition' provides the method. We need to develop new standards for assessing other aspects of natural capital that can be applied at all levels and in all situations to ensure that monitoring is meaningful and effective. One example; changes in soil organic matter could provide an over-arching measure to indicate positive and negative trends resulting from specific land management activities in a given locality.

**Question 5: How best can we reduce our footprint on the natural environment abroad, through the goods, services and products we use?**

**Awareness team: have staff whose sole job is to constantly assess and review where our lifestyle is affecting our footprint abroad. Included in their work should be to review emerging articles, literature, books and published ideas by leading activists which will help flag up issues to be investigated. Recent examples (as Defra has identified) would have been the soy and palm oil production footprints.**

**Question 6: What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?**

**The ‘Awareness Team mentioned in Q 5 above would also be available to give expert support to initiatives generated by other charities/NGOs. (E.g. FOE’s Sustainable Livestock Bill).**

**Question 7: How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumers or by shaping policy?**

**To support appropriate initiatives e.g. such as Transition Towns, local climate change groups. These grass-roots initiatives have sprung up spontaneously in a number of local communities where there is sufficient collective level of concern for environmental sustainability. They have successfully implemented a wide range of actions that have helped to reshape attitudes and create imaginative solutions involving food, energy, currency and lifestyle. Clearly they have already demonstrated tremendous possibilities for changing the social mood in these specific localities; but this is something that needs to be fostered and promoted more widely so that it becomes a national movement enabling ordinary people to permanently change their lifestyles in a way that, if adopted on a large enough scale would improve the survival prospects for the whole planet.**

**Continue to work with and support charities and ngo’s (such as RSPB, NT, Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust, Soil Association, etc, etc), who already have educational and promotional programmes aimed at young people and the general public. More could be done to promote awareness and support for protecting our environment amongst the different practitioner sectors, bearing in mind that most land managers are important members of their local community. FWAG, LEAF and the various organic sector bodies are all examples of voluntary bodies that are actively promoting the benefits from improved environmental outcomes directly to farmers as well as the wider public. These groups could all achieve much more with increased support from government and probably at less cost, speaking as they do, directly to farmers in their own language whilst at the same time providing the general public with an overview of the industry.**

**Food production from animals is accepted to be an inefficient method of producing human food with a conversion ration of only 10:1; therefore continue to suggest and persuade consumers that they reduce there meat intake on one or two days a week; and that their remaining intake is sourced from extensive farming systems where traditional livestock are crucial to the management of some wildlife habitats.**

**Question 8: What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?**

Central government organisations have the crucial role to set a legal and structural framework that local government can then adopt. Without this framework some local communities may well not give sufficient priority to their local natural environment. The framework should trumpet all the inter-related societal benefits that emerge when a holistic approach is adopted. Your website nicely sets out these ecosystem service benefits but is probably not as well known or widely appreciated as it deserves to be.

**Question 9: How best can Government incentivise innovative and effective action on the natural environment, across England, at the local level?**

See answer to Q7 and Q8. Environmental Stewardship is the main mechanism for funding environmentally beneficial forms of land management nationally but has very little local input at a policy level. Perhaps some of the funding could be earmarked for special projects that had a particular local significance or involvement? Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) have been a successful mechanism for securing the involvement of local volunteers to look after their local environment; these could be re-launched and widened in scope.

**a. How best can local government and other local partners work together to improve local outcomes on the natural environment, and pursue a more integrated approach linking a healthy natural environment to economic prosperity, sustainable development and a better quality of life, health and wellbeing?**

It would need a concerted effort to start addressing these issues by discussing an agenda for action at a local level. The success of such discussions would depend on assembling all of the key partners at the outset and then providing the means to implement the actions considered necessary. Each local area should have a plan of action that can be subscribed to by everyone, right down to the level of private individuals. Local authorities should be much more responsive than they generally are to opportunities for helping grass-roots initiatives, such as food co-operatives and transition groups that could assist in formulating and delivering these local environmental action plans

**b. What are the most effective mechanisms for managing the natural environment where cross-boundary issues are involved, and making the link to other mechanisms for economic growth, transport and planning?**

This is another call for more and better joining up of policy and practice amongst the widest possible range of interests.

**c. How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?**

Most authorities already employ an ecologist to advise on the issues raised by planning proposals. Hitherto, they appear to have had little clout except where an issue of legal compliance has been at stake. Measures should be adopted to lend more weight to environmental advocacy within the planning process, possibly by increasing resources for the ecological teams within local authorities

**Question 10: How best could the economy reflect the true value of nature's services in the way business is done, to drive smarter, greener growth?**

Your PES review (reported on your website) looks at market based (economic) instruments such as taxes, charges, subsidies and tradable permits where users voluntarily compensate

providers. How far this is a new way of presenting environmental taxes is unclear but it is hard to believe that the voluntary approach will deliver progress quickly enough. Would not the 'polluter-pays principle' better 'encourage' the scale of compliance in a time-scale now required?

Also see our response to Q1 which sets the context for the above.

**Question 11: Responsible businesses are already looking for ways to reduce their impact on the environment. How can we encourage more action like this?**

Continue to publicise the market benefits for those firms. For example in the banking sector the Cooperative and Triodos Banks have seen a huge surge in business once they had agreed and adopted ethical practices. In a similar way in the nature conservation sector recent research commissioned by VINE (\*) has shown that staff generally identify, appreciate and support statements which reflect the values and ethics of the organisation (NT, RSPB, etc, etc) they are working for.

(\*Ref: *The nature of nature conservationists – freeing the spirit or toeing the line? This article reports on a study which considered how the aspirations and values of nature conservationists themselves match with the organisations that employ them. Cara Roberts & Gabrielle Overgaard-Horup. In press for ECOS.*)

This market-based approach needs to be backed up by a clear and consistent application of 'carrot and stick' measures that will incentivize the positive and penalize negative behaviours, combining to reinforce the take up of the environmental message to businesses that have shown less enthusiasm.

**Question 12: What are the barriers to joining-up and seeking multiple benefits from our natural assets?**

The biggest barrier is probably the lack of understanding of how inter-related the assets are and how easily they can be degraded unintentionally. Getting across this holism (= Gaia theory) is perhaps the biggest challenge. We need to give more voice to encouraging people to value the natural assets and adopt ethical standards of living. VINE has positioned itself right there in respect of the nature conservation movement, but we are perhaps working with the converted. Perhaps the VINE approach needs to be broadened to be relevant to wider society? (See: [www.vineproject.org.uk](http://www.vineproject.org.uk))

The biggest boost would come from seeing leadership by example. Every effort should be made by government departments and local authorities to implement the kind of joined up practices that are so urgently needed. Ordinary people need to see the rhetoric being converted into action at all levels of government if they are to be convinced of its value.

**Question 13: What are the barriers to thinking big and taking a landscape scale approach to managing our natural assets?**

Land ownership has to be the biggest barrier whereby everything has to be done by persuasion or fiscal incentives. This will not change. Appealing to peoples ethical values and getting them to want to be 'part of the solution' rather than 'part of the problem' perhaps has to be the way forwards. "Thinking globally, acting locally [Agenda 21]" and "give nature space" are positive messages to convey and engender a sense of responsibility. Here, as in other aspects of business, the pressure is on land managers to put individual profit above environmental principle. Achieving a concerted approach to land management

will need some very significant economic drivers to win round all the land-owning interests to a single purpose. HLS has already demonstrated some benefits here, in cases where it has secured co-operation amongst groups of ‘commoners’ who are able to bury their differences and learn to work collaboratively in order to gain a share in the payments from a single combined land management agreement

**Question 14: What should be the priorities for the UK’s role in EU and international action, to protect and enhance the natural environment at home and abroad?**

Environmental standards need to be applied across the globe by multi-national companies so that they cannot move polluting operations to countries with no controls. Encourage international adoption of policies such as: the polluter pays, PES instruments, green taxes on multi-national businesses.

Encourage the adoption of a holistic world view – (= Gaia theory). This will be more effective if the UK demonstrates effective and committed action within its own borders. The best diplomatic arguments will always be capable of being undermined if not matched by implementation of domestic policies that match the words.

Keep a watching brief on the ‘law of unintended consequences’ e.g. the downside to adoption of the European bio-fuel policy on rainforest destruction.

**And finally**

**Question 15: If you could choose *just one* priority action for the Natural Environment White Paper to drive forward locally, nationally or internationally – what would it be?**

Sorry but there are two! One general and one specific:

**Generally:** to give a higher profile to the intrinsic value of the natural capital and to Gaia ethics and values. The economic imperatives are obviously important but they can be a double-edged sword, depending on the time perspective they are being viewed by. Government policies would carry that much more weight if they were backed up by an unambiguous conviction in the value of the natural world for ‘our’ and ‘its’ own sake. The winning of hearts and minds to secure a change in actions is crucial.

**Specifically:** to work much more intensively to limit population growth. As has been said above everything starts and finishes with this issue. It was first raised in the 1960’s in the book “The Limits to Growth”. Had effective action been forthcoming then we would not now be facing a population of 9 billion people. Now some 50 years on we as a species are still running to the cliff edge like lemmings and the result will not be pleasant for the natural world .... or for us!